

Is Hell Really Endless?

Scripture: Exodus 21:23–25; Matthew 25:46

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One view of hell that seems to be making a strong resurgence today among evangelicals is Annihilationism. There are slight variations, but it essentially teaches God will eventually snuff every unbeliever out of existence. Some Annihilationists make room for divine wrath, but they don't allow it to extend beyond the lake of fire. In other words, they won't allow God the full force of His judgment, which is eternal, conscious torment. For them, the lake of fire is what completely consumes and finally destroys sinners. Whether they see death as the end, or whether they see hell's torments as limited in duration, the result is the same—a denial of the *endlessness* of hell.

"Wait a minute," you protest, "what about all the biblical references to *eternal* flames and *everlasting* punishment? Doesn't Matthew 25:46 say the wicked will go away into *eternal* punishment, but the righteous into *eternal* life?" Good question. For no good exegetical reason, some Annihilationists have understood the word "eternal" to refer, not to a duration of time, but to the quality of God's judgment. It's eternal in quality, even though it has an end. Other Annihilationists say "eternal" refers to the effect of divine judgment. That is to say, God's judgment results in death—as in extinction, annihilation—which is a state of non-being that lasts eternally.

If you're having a hard time bending your mind around that, you're not alone. It's hard to conceive of a sinner experiencing an eternal *quality* of judgment without it lasting forever. Matthew 25:46 clearly teaches that the duration of punishment and life are alike, both eternal. John MacArthur has said,

Punishment in hell is defined by the word *aionios*, which is the word eternal or everlasting. There are people who would like to redefine that word *aionios* and say, "Well, it doesn't really mean forever." But if you do that with hell, you've just done it with heaven, because the same word is used to describe both. If there is not an everlasting hell, then there is not an everlasting heaven. And I'll go one beyond that. The same word is used to describe God. And so if there is not an everlasting hell, then there is not an everlasting heaven, nor is there an everlasting God. It is clear that God is eternal; and, therefore, that heaven is eternal, and so is hell. (John MacArthur, "A Testimony of One Surprised to Be in Hell, Part 2")

Augustine put it simply more than 1,500 years ago: "To say that life eternal shall be endless, [but that] punishment eternal shall come to an end is the height of absurdity."

To say passages like Matthew 25:46 refer to eternality as a *quality* of judgment but say nothing about the *duration*, especially without exegetical support, is simply to beg the question. The meaning of "eternal" in that passage is clear—it's everlasting.

Annihilationists sometimes explain "eternal" in the sense of an eternal effect. They say words like *destruction* and *death* refer to some kind of disintegration or consumption. God doesn't torment the wicked for all eternity, He simply ends their existence, and the effect of that singular act of judgment lasts forever. As we noted above, they will allow God to be wrathful, but only for a time. To say divine

punishment is everlasting is going way too far; it's a form of cruel and unusual punishment. Eventually, they believe God will snuff the wicked out of existence, and that condition of non-existence lasts forever.

Apart from the metaphysical problem (How can something that no longer exists be said to last forever?), there's a very serious problem with the "cessation of existence" view—it fails to account for a Lawgiver who is infinite and eternal by nature. The severity of an offense is measured, not merely by the nature of the act itself, but also in relation to the one offended. For example, if one man punches another man on a street corner, he may suffer some consequences—charges of disturbing the peace, assault, or battery. But to punch the President of the United States ups the ante; when the Secret Service finishes with him, he'll be doing some serious prison time.

It's like that with offenses committed against a holy God. Since an offense against a finite lawgiver is finite, the punishment to satisfy the offense is also finite. That's the principle behind Exodus 21, an eye for an eye (Exodus 21:23-25). But an offense against an infinite, eternal Lawgiver is *not* finite; it's infinite and eternal. It is up to the Judge to determine the severity of the infraction itself—i.e., telling a "white" lie versus committing homicide—but the *nature* of the infraction is measured against the nature of God who is holy and eternal. Likewise, God, who is perfect in righteousness, determines the justice an infraction demands. According to His Word, the punishment for an offense against a holy God is everlasting torment in hell.

On a human level, it's understandable when people recoil from the Bible's teaching about eternal torment. It's an absolutely horrible, terrifying doctrine. It's impossible for us to conceive of a crime so severe—even the crimes of notorious people like Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot, Mao, and Osama bin Laden—as to merit the everlasting, excruciating agony described in the Bible. But that shows just how little we understand the sinfulness of sin on the one hand, and the holiness of God on the other.

God's ways are higher than our ways, and His thoughts are higher than our thoughts—we cannot fully comprehend Him (Isa. 55:8-9). In an uncomfortably poignant and penetrating way, the doctrine of eternal hell confronts our loyalty, reveals our true authority, and demands that we set aside what seems reasonable to us and trust in the righteous judgment of a holy God. When we embrace the hard doctrines of the Bible, it becomes one of the most significant evidences of true, God-given faith.

The biblical doctrine of an eternal hell gives us yet another reason to praise God for the gospel. It took an eternal person to satisfy an eternal penalty against sin, which disqualified the entire human race, except one Person—Jesus Christ. He is the Son of man *and* the eternal Son of God. When Jesus laid down *His* life, His sacrifice satisfied every requirement of divine justice. For those who trust in Jesus Christ as their Substitute, His death has satisfied the eternal wrath of an eternal, righteous God. He bore our punishment in His body, absorbing God's eternal wrath. But for those who do not embrace Christ, they are left to themselves—they bear the guilt of their offenses against an eternal God, and they will suffer for it eternally, never able to satisfy His eternal wrath.

I hope the doctrine of eternal torment sobers you. May it fill you with praise to God for saving you from eternal punishment, for giving you eternal life instead. May it humble you when you realize you're not getting what you deserve. And may it ignite in you a passion to proclaim the gospel to those poor souls who are unaware of the terror that awaits them outside the mercy of God.

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